



The American Voices New Play Institute at Arena Stage

## Defining Diversity

By Janine Sobeck

A report on a convening of theater artists  
and leaders on the topic of diversity in  
the new play sector.

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## **I. Introduction**

In March 2009, a group of leaders in the field of new play development and production gathered in Louisville, Kentucky at the request of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Actors Theater of Louisville. In conjunction with the Humana Festival of New American Plays, this group of more than 80 artists, institutional leaders and funders held a session of meetings to, as was expressed in Ben Pesner's final report, "further Mellon's ongoing examination of the state of new play development and production in the American not-for-profit theater."

During the meetings, one of the issues raised revolved around the question of diversity in the American theater. To the members of the Arena Stage Artistic Development Team in attendance (including myself), the main focus, questions and despair of the participants centered almost exclusively around the topic of racial diversity, and particularly around the black/white divide. Afterward, we continued to converse among ourselves, puzzling over the absence of conversation around generational, economic, political and aesthetic diversity – as well as questions regarding other races.

In July 2009, thanks to the support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Arena Stage founded the American Voices New Play Institute (the Institute). Dedicated to examining and advancing the infrastructure of the national field of new play development, one of the Institute's commitments is to routinely host convenings that allow artists committed to creating and producing new plays to examine current trends and practices with a focus on improving and contributing to the ongoing dialogue regarding the new play infrastructure nationwide.

For the first convening, the Institute wanted to focus on this question of "Defining Diversity." The Institute, in partnership with the Georgetown University Theater & Performance Studies Program, invited a group of more than 20 participants to the Georgetown campus to wrestle with the question of diversity: what we mean when we use the word, why does it matter, and how can/does it benefit the infrastructure for new play development in the American not-for-profit theater.

## **II. The Three Circles**

Moderated by Arena Stage Associate Artistic Director David Dower, the format of the two-day convening was structured to allow both large group discussions and smaller focused discussions, as well as encourage the discussions to move beyond the room.

## The Complete Circle

Friday was organized with the intent of keeping the entire group circled up and responding to each other. The group was encouraged to begin the discussion with their thoughts on where the conversation currently existed. Although a few expressed excitement over attacking the question of diversity, many voiced frustration over yet "another" conversation about the same topic. As one experienced African American theater artist said, "There's a part of me that is already sucking my teeth."

David Dower jumpstarted the inquiry by asking six people to report on specific parts of their own work. These six artists, which included two executive directors, a program director, two playwrights and a creative consultant from all areas of the country and representing a wide spectrum of aesthetics, gave brief background information about the work that they were passionate about as well as their own individual perspectives on where they and the community in which they work fall on the diversity spectrum. The group then responded in turn to what was said and commented on what their own experiences have been.

## The Inner Circle

Borrowing a form David Dower had first encountered at the annual gathering in New Mexico at the SEED Institute titled "The Language of Spirit," the second day was constructed with the concept of an inner circle of people actively responding to a prompt, or question, surrounded by an outer circle of active listeners. All day Saturday the group was continuously re-divided and re-mixed between an inner circle (responders) and an outer circle (listeners). The inner circle was comprised of eight or nine individuals who, while sitting around a table in the middle of the room, were invited to address a specific question from their unique perspective. The rest of the participants were invited to listen actively to the conversation while sitting in a larger circle at the perimeter. Each new question brought new responders to the table. After two questions, the group was again re-divided into break-out sessions during which everyone was free to continue the discussion that had started in the larger room. At the end of the day, the entire group re-convened as one circle to discuss the final question.

The Institute provided five questions that shaped the discussion of the day:

- 1) There's a lot of talk about incorporating diversity in the mission and goals of theater organizations across the country.
  - What does it actually mean when we talk about diversity in that context? If you talk of it in your own work or organization, what do you mean when you do?

- Can we define the benefit or value? What are we after when we chase it?
- 2) What's actually happening right now with regards to diversity around the field?
- What is the state of the state with respect to the relationship of theater artist to the institution in the world of diverse work and programming?
  - What are the existing practices and applications for advancing diversity that seem to be effective or merit close consideration?
  - What are the obstacles, challenges, confusions impacting efforts to diversify the field?
  - Are there specific institutions or organizations that are right on the money when it comes to promoting diversity as we picture it?
- 3) There's this somewhat provocative notion of diversity programs in theaters putting cultural diversity on people who are in many ways working in and from the main street. Can we have a conversation about what it is to feel yourself part of the "diversity quotient" of a community or organization.
- How is it affecting you, personally, right now in your own work life?
  - What are the challenges to finding or making a home in the institution for diverse artists, and what are the benefits?
- 4) Where does the audience fit into all of this?
- Can we effectively measure the value of a diversified audience around the theater?
  - Is the end goal any different for audiences than it is for artists?
  - Who's in your audience?
- 5) What's the big vision for diversity in contemporary American theater as you see it? What next steps would we need to take now to make that future a reality?

### The Third Circle

Throughout the entire two days there also existed what came to be known as the "third circle." The Institute invited theater practitioners and enthusiasts from around the country to follow the discussion virtually throughout the convening. Two theater bloggers were invited to immediately disseminate what was happening in the room through official posts on the Institute's blog, unofficial posts on their own blogs and through continual comments, quotes and thoughts on Twitter. The #newplay conversation was hosted on the Institute's Twitter account (updated by one of the bloggers), redirected through the bloggers' personal Twitter accounts and invited all followers to

interject their own thoughts and opinions into the thread. The live Twitter stream was projected onto a white board so that the participants in the room could see where the outside conversation was going.

### **III. Do we actually want diversity?**

In preparation for the convening, the participants were given a group of recent writings on diversity. One of these, created by Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser and entitled "Questions on Diversity," questioned the effectiveness of forcing white or Eurocentric theaters to diversify their programming and/or their Board:

When large, white organizations produce minority works they typically select the "low hanging fruit," the most popular works by diverse artists featuring the most famous minority performers and directors. This almost invariably hurts the minority arts organizations in the neighborhood, most of which are small and underfunded, and cannot afford to match the marketing clout or the casting glamor [sic] of their larger white counterparts. How else to explain the reduced strength of American black theater companies over the past twenty years?

And when a single minority is placed on a board with no responsibility other than to represent a race, it does nothing to change the true mission, or audience base, of the organization. More is required.

This blog posting, along with an African American playwright's opening question of whether or not theaters actually want diversity, pushed the group to distinguish between what is happening at the large leading institutions – often LORTS – and the small to mid-sized theaters and play development centers around the country.

Overall, the large LORT theaters were seen as "white institutions who talk and talk and talk and talk about it" but, even though they receive a lot of attention and money for the discussions, they don't actually change. As one executive director said at the end of the convening, "A lot of the suggestions I'm hearing are actually things that are already happening. They're probably just not happening in the larger institutions."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is also telling that while invitations were extended to several of the large LORT institutions that were frequently named, the only LORT theater that sent a representative (other than Arena Stage) was Ford's Theater.

This thread of the conversation continuously came back to the question of a theater's mission. All agreed that in order for a diversity push to be effective, there needs to be a paradigm shift in which diversity becomes inherent to the mission and values of the organization. Although participants recognized Kaiser's point that specific types of "diversity" were not inherent to the mission of particular large institutions, the debate over whether they should be had many different sides, examples and suggestions. The three most frequently recurring were:

1. "Inheritance problems" - Individual artistic leaders find it difficult to change the established aesthetic mission of the organizations they have inherited, especially when under the mandate to sell a high number of steeply-priced tickets.
2. "Pick and choose" - Specific theaters (both large and small) were highlighted for making the decision to pick one aspect of the diversity question (usually race) with the conscious decision to focus solely on that area.
3. "Collaboration" - The underused idea of large organizations partnering with smaller companies who "know" this type of diversity. As one executive director said, "Typically a mentorship program [is] where a big institution staff member will mentor the little institution and it's patronizing...[We need to] scale it in both directions...A total back and forth [where we realize] what we do well they don't necessarily do well, and what they may do well, we don't necessarily do well."

Throughout the discussion, the largest problem recognized was the distribution of funding. Most participants agreed that many granting organizations and other funders have tried to promote diversity through their programs. However, the common belief is that the "diversity" money continues to go to the large "problem" institutions who give lip service to the problem instead of actually working to embed it within the organization. In the meantime, the smaller organizations that are seen as "practicing diversity" continue to struggle.

The second biggest problem identified originated with the artists themselves. Many artists perceive the large organizations – "the castles" – as the preferred place to work and choose to fight for a select number of spots instead of exploring their options at the smaller theaters that might be better suited for their work. As one artistic leader said, "Very few of the young playwrights reach out to the small theatres. They want to go to the biggies." This causes a lack of opportunity both for the smaller organizations and for the artists. However, this also returns to the question of funding: one playwright noted that they all want to work with the big companies because it "really helps me be a better artist when I actually have the resources...When I have the thought and it's fully realized."

## IV. Defining Diversity

While the set-up of the convening allowed the conversation to cover broad ground, there were a few main themes that were continuously re-visited and re-examined by the group.

What kind of diversity are we actually talking about?

It quickly became clear that "diversity" is an ill-defined term that is used to represent a myriad of things, people and ideas. Among all the examples, arguments, ideas and frustrations that were given voice by the participants, the idea of what/who needs to be diverse could be grouped into four categories: Institutions (Staff/Board), Programming, Artists and Audience.

### Institutions (Staff/Board)

The general consensus among the group was that when you diversify the people within your organization there is a ripple effect. It changes the conversations that happen within the organization, which affects what you put on your stage, which ultimately affects the experience that your audience has – and the conversation that they have afterward. However, as one creative consultant in the room said, diversity is often treated as a spice – "something that's going to spice up the same old stock rather than changing the essence of the broth."

Some of the main problems seen by the group were as follows:

- **Tokenism:** The diverse people who actually are on staff aren't always the one with the power to effect change – they are brought on for an expressed purpose (usually to work with or to represent a certain community), are often patronized for the work that they are doing, and are the positions that are first "let go" in times of economic difficulty. They also suffer from the burden of "representing" an entire group instead of having the ability to explore their individual identity or unique viewpoint.
- **Fear:** Existing staff members fear that when the topic of diversity comes up it means that they will lose their jobs in order to make room for "the diversity quotient."
- **Mission:** The idea of diversity does not live within the existing mission of the organization, so it is never given priority.

### Programming

Group members often complained about the large "white" institutions with their "white" programming. Obstacles to diverse programming were seen as:

- Slots: Institutions are only willing to program a certain number of "diverse" slots per season (i.e. the African American play in February). The idea of slots is further complicated by the idea that the institution can only do one play from one particular ethnic group per season – "we can't do Alice [Tuan] this season, [because] we're already doing David Henry Hwang."
- Artistic Director: When you have one person making all the decisions for a long period of time, the work will inherently be static no matter how dynamic that person is.
- Audience: Institutions worry that there is not enough of a certain community to support a play written by an ethnic playwright – even though, as one Latina playwright said, "When you put up an Ibsen play, are you looking for Norwegians to come?"

### Artists

The conversation about artists revolved around who was getting work, where they were all coming from, and who was in the room during a production.

- Favorites: Institutions have a group of "safe" diverse artists who they work with and are unwilling to risk branching out.
- Ethnic Voices: Artists are being encouraged to "exoticize" and exploit their ethnicity to make their plays "worthy" of LORT.
- The Big 5: The problem of all the playwrights coming out of the "same 5 MFA programs" (more on this later).
- Rehearsal Room: Even when artists of color are put in the season, everyone working on the play and in the rehearsal room is still white.

### Audience

The buzz word when talking about audience was "community" – whether you were a part of it, reflecting it and/or addressing its needs. However, as one associate producer said "I think the majority of theaters in the United States say they want diversity, but really what they want are butts in seats. They are afraid that their audience is literally dying. They look out and they see a sea of gray and they go 'Oh my God, I have to get some more people in here' and they go 'oooo, look at all those markets that I have been ignoring, that I have been actively not participating in.'" The sense of those gathered was that diversity in the audience would happen when diversity on stage happened – when people could see themselves on stage.

During question #4 – and the conversation about where does the audience fit into all of this – the group grappled with the idea of trust and the audience. Many championed the idea that the audience is "so much smarter than we give them credit for" and that the institution must trust that they are willing to experience more on stage than we think. However, there was a widespread

feeling that the theater must first become trustworthy. This idea of being "trustworthy" centered mainly on the relationship that the theater develops with an audience. As one educational leader said, "Once you make an investment in a community...they think that's a real investment....When you're working with real people, they expect it to be real. They expect that, oh, if you have a relationship with me then we're going to have a relationship now. Even though the project's going to be over, I'm still going to remember your birthday and when something comes up in a couple months, we'll talk and I'll email you and you'll email me back. There's a relationship...You have to commit to it. You have to invest in it."

General consensus was that if the theater creates that trust as a "curator," then the audience will trust them enough to see what is on stage, even with the knowledge that they might not "like" it.

What actually makes you diverse?

As the panelists discussed what/who needs to be diverse, the slipperiness around **what** makes a theater or an artist diverse continued to cause obstacles in the dialogue. As one executive director said, "This success around diversity seems to me to be relatively unnamed,...and so then it becomes difficult because it's baffling." This group of participants seemed to measure diversity in relation to five areas: Race, Class, Form, Demographics and Geography.

### Race

The use of race as the measurement for success in diversity was by far the most frequently used example and argument throughout the entire two day session. As one organizational leader said, quoting the late Sekou Sundiata, "this is just another term for multiculturalism, minority-- 'diversity.'" As in the Humana gathering, the black/white divide dominated the question of racial diversity; however the presence of other races (including Hispanic, South East Asian, Filipino, and a few "mixed" lineages) in the room created a space for other viewpoints in the dialogue.

Race (with conversations including color, culture and ethnicity) was heralded both as the "easiest" and the most "interesting" area of transition in all four of the previously listed aspects (institution, programming, artists and audience). As one African American artistic leader said about programming, "It's easier in a way to talk about racial/ethnic group differences than it is to really think that through and go 'whoa, what does that mean? What are those stories that don't get told?' ...It's not that they're not getting written but that...those voices are not considered to be of a value enough to make it onto the mainstage." Many participants stressed the fact that it can't be "just a few sprinkles of

spice" but something that is integrated throughout the entire organization. Responsibility to the communities in which the theaters were located was often used as the reason for racial diversity – both that the institution reflected its own community and so that the community could see itself reflected on the stage. One South East Asian playwright/administrator went so far to say that "we're not curing cancer. But I ask the question: Is it about national security on some level?...There's a guy named George Hoefecker and he goes around [to schools]...,and talks about this. And he says: 'We don't fear the people whose stories we know.' ...So I always look at this like as a person of color who came to this country when I was about twelve. And before I even came here, I heard stories of white people and I learned a lot about their culture and I was very moved by what I learned... Why can't it go the other way?...How do we tap into all of these stories and get these voices somehow fed into the larger culture so that we stop fearing each other?"

An interesting spin off from this conversation dealt with playwrights of color and the plays they write. Early on in the conversation, a prominent white playwright who writes "black" plays was used as a negative example of how white institutions are not allowing African Americans to tell their own stories. However, later on, there was a lively debate about whether or not playwrights of color should be limited to writing plays from within their own culture. Questions ranged from "what does it do to a Korean American in the audience watching a play by a Korean American that has no Korean Americans on stage" to "how many identities do we have within ourselves" to "if all we're trying to do is make the best possible work, how are we hurting ourselves by having to necessarily write from our culture/ethnicity?"

### Class

One participant spearheaded the conversation about class with this observation: "I decided, you know because it's who I am, to find out where this whole diversity conversation starts. And it starts in 1978 with the Bakke trial about affirmative action and he is protesting not getting into the UC Davis medical school. And what the court says is that UC Davis has an interest in taking race into consideration in the same way that they have an interest in what states their students come from or what their non-academic interests are – so like if they like to be in the marching band, or whatever. And so diversity was not originally used in the legal sense to be about race but about diversity." Followed up with the question, "Where are the plays that are about the uneducated, the working class, the people who don't live in suburbs and cities?" the conversations about class revolved mostly around what stories were being presented on stage.

Many saw the current education of playwrights as a major obstacle to the creation of stories from other classes – due to the nature of the programs as well as the prohibitive nature of the high tuition fees (more on this later).

### Form

The conversation about diversity of form revolved mostly around the MFA programs and the "trusting the artist" discussions (more on both later).

Overall, the problems described by the group had two main focuses:

1. Institutions were faulted for all chasing after the same "hot" or "safe" titles.
2. Artists were faulted for creating plays that all "taste" the same.

### Demographics

Interestingly enough, the age conversation was almost exclusively concerned with the composition of the audience. The group agreed with previous statements that the greatest fear of the large regional theaters is that the "blue-hairs" who have been their financial supporters are dying off and there is a great scramble to figure out how to appeal to the younger generations. As one of the bloggers argued, theater is never going to be as cheap or customized as the "on-demand" generation has become accustomed. Since we're "so counter to what the world is, our responsibility for delivering a good experience, a thoughtful experience, a provoking experiencing is higher. If we're just delivering lower level stuff, then we can be beat by anything. Right? If I can out-do your play on my Xbox-360, then you're beat. Right? Because it's right here. If I can have a better experience on my Xbox – a more thought-provoking experience there – then there's no reason in the world I should go to spend 60 bucks, or 120 bucks if I'm bringing my wife, on your piece."

While the so-called "blue-hairs" are believed to be the greatest majority of audience members at the major "white" institutions, there was also a prevailing belief that what the playwrights of today are writing is usually not relevant to that specific group. As one African American playwright said, it's not that "I don't think that the plays I'm writing aren't relevant – they're just not relevant to...a house full of 58-80 year old white people."

### Geography

Like the question of audience, the issue of geographical diversity repeatedly harkened back to the idea of community. Several participants commented that it was important to recognize the type of community in which the institution exists. One associate producer said that is "it's less change and it's more recognition of things that already exist. You know, we have these

really beautiful, narrow definitions of things that we get very comfortable with. You know, for instance: a diverse audience is an audience that has ethnic diversity. That's something I've had to let go of. [My city], is not New York...[it's] not LA. The type of diversity that we're looking for in that audience is different."

This recognition by individual theaters is complicated by a recent study done by a leader in theater in rural communities which revealed that the vast majority of professional theaters were located in what is called "nylachi" (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago) and most university programs are training their students for that specific marketplace.

It's complicated.

Although many participants had a particular area of diversity to champion, there was also a sense that many voices in the long fight for diversity have become tired and no longer want to continue simply because it has become too complex and many artists don't fit neatly into one specific category. As one executive director said, "I've heard from my mentors and my predecessors who've been in this conversation about diversity who are tired, who no longer want to carry the torch. And they look to me like 'it's your turn' and I'm like 'I'm sorry, but it's not – I can't carry this torch' which has now become so complex and I don't even know exactly at what level am I supposed to engage in this conversation? Because I am a first generation Filipino American who is queer who grew up in the suburbs of St. Louis, [who lives in the heart of Texas], which has very little to do with almost every other experience."

There was also recognition that what is diverse for one institution is not diverse for another – and that within an organization, what is diverse for one department is not diverse for another. Variety in itself does not inherently mean diversity and what brings diversity to an administrative office might not be the same thing to a production department. As one associate producer said, "If you put something on those departments, it's not organic and it doesn't work. What happens is you do some kind of bold new hiring and that person's there and they don't fit and they don't know what they're doing and they're not supported by the other people because they don't see a need for them. So we're talking a lot and we're finding out in the costume shop they want more men. And that's what they see as diversity. Which is surprising. You don't think "oh, more men!"

The Ideal

Returning to the ideas of Sekou Sundiata, one organizational leader expressed that true diversity in theater would come when we "take this to the

level of democracy in the arts." This democracy, which is described as a "democracy of ideas that is expressed through different voices, different cultures," was seen as a "humane social practice that elevates and promotes the best in individuals," while forcing us "to think of each other as different and as the same at the same time at a fundamental level."

## V. A Few Tidbits

As previously mentioned, there were a few ideas that were repeatedly revisited throughout the conversation.

### Trusting the Artists

Many participants offered the idea that the quickest way to diversity (in all areas) was to trust the artists: that their diverse backgrounds, aesthetics and experiences bring an inherent diversity to the American theater. One playwright, who was chafing under a commission that required a protagonist from her ethnicity, said, "It's the hardest thing in the world to conceive of art from the place of ingredients. It is just plain hard. And I struggled. I struggled with the fact that I was being 'why can't I, as an [ethnic] artist, just write something I'm passionate about?' And you can probably assume that it's not going to be all white,... Nothing I've written yet has been. Just by nature, by virtue, of who I am." Another executive director supported this view, saying that, "If we're gonna tell a story about a young Latino person in the United States today, it's going to involve black folks and white folks and Asian folks. Probably romantically."

The group believed that trusting artists has two major positive effects:

1. The audience would be regularly introduced to new stories and cultures, opening them up to more diverse experiences and bringing new audiences into the theater.
2. The artists would bring their own, unique playwriting processes into the institutions, forcing the institutions to learn how to support them.

The belief in the room was that if theaters simply supported the "best" artists (though there was some disagreement on what that term meant) then the theater would be filled with a wide array of voices. Chicago Dramatists was offered as a good example – they support the best playwrights in the city and therefore their pool is inherently diverse.

### Rainforest

One institutional leader introduced ecologist Kevin Danaher's idea of "Unity through Diversity" and suggested that Danaher's teachings about the ecology

of a rainforest provided a solid model on how to achieve diversity in the American theater. The natural state of a rainforest is "of complete diversity right side by side." Unlike orchards, where everything is the same, grown in straight rows, rainforests thrive by having very different plants growing and working together, side by side. While sloppier than orchards, they are more resilient and less fragile, making them inherently healthier.

The MFA stat

After someone related a story about reading a "diverse" group of plays that all "tasted" the same only to find out afterward that all the playwrights had gone through the same MFA programs, David Dower mentioned a conversation that he had with a group of playwrights while researching a report for the Mellon Foundation. He asked this group whether or not an MFA is required to be a professional playwright. The group (all of whom had MFAs) responded yes, that an MFA was what distinguished you from being a hobbyist.

There was a widespread disagreement with that proclamation.

During the ensuing discussion, someone paraphrased Todd London's report from the Humana Festival which was focused on the economics and culture of playwriting in America. Now published by the Theater Development Fund and entitled *Outrageous Fortune: the life and times of the new American play*, the quote as remembered said that 9 out of 10 of playwrights surveyed had MFAs from 1 of 7 MFA programs. (\*it should be noted that this was an incorrect paraphrase and that the correct quote<sup>2</sup> with the correct fact was

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2 From Chapter 2: *The Lives and Livelihoods of Playwrights*, pages 73-75. Emphasis in the original.

#### ON THE TRACK

Considering the financial difficulty, if not near-impossibility, of maintaining a professional existence, it's unsettling to note that a professional or career track for playwrights seems to have emerged over the past few decades. This track leads through college training programs, specifically those offering Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees in playwriting...

... A full 56 percent of the playwrights completed Masters (8%) or MFA (48%) level training, a figure that doesn't include the other 7 percent who attended the non-degree program at Julliard. In other words, nearly two out of three practicing playwrights come through on training program or another. Older playwrights are less likely to have advanced playwriting degrees, further evidence that this "track" is a fairly recent development. Of the respondents with MFAs, almost three-quarters come through one of six programs-- Columbia University, Yale University, New York University, University of Texas/Austin, University of Iowa, and Brown University (in order of the number of graduates in this study). Add the non-degreed Julliard students and seven schools account for almost nine out of ten of the study playwrights with advanced professional training or 42 percent of all 250 playwrights responding. The picture that appears is not merely of a track for training, but a system, with a handful of prestigious graduate programs feeding the field\*, offering entree to their students where access might otherwise be more difficult. ...

sent to the participants after the convening). That statistic was mentioned repeatedly for the rest of the convening as a negative aspect of the current American theater new play ecology. As one company leader said, "We continue to send our artists through the same system and when they arrive out they sound the same as everyone else... to the detriment of our theatre as an art form. And to the detriment of the sort of diversity that we're actually talking about." This stat also spread quickly through the Twitter and blog conversations (more on this later).

## VI. On Models, Castles and Caterers

From the beginning, many participants were up front about their hesitation to return to the diversity conversation because that was all that it ever was – a conversation with no actual follow through. As a goal of the convening was to facilitate subsequent action, a significant portion of the conversation was geared toward possible action steps that participants could both adopt in service of their own personal careers as well as bring into the institutions.

Although some of the ideas were more easily "measurable" (diversifying staff and board, eliminating the idea of "slots" in a season, creating collaborations, re-examining the current practices of marketing and outreach<sup>3</sup>), there was a general consensus that a bigger, more fundamental change needs to happen in the field.

Although the desire to infiltrate the leading, large LORT "castles" (as well as the MFA programs) in order to have a more substantial impact on the field was real, there was also a recurring question about whether this was the most effective way to instigate change. One participant quoted Buckminster Fuller's belief: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." As one blogger mentioned, "These regional theaters are almost perfectly designed for the exact outcomes they are creating now. They are perfectly designed for these outcomes... So one of the things that I'm always thinking about is creating different models for theater or live performance to become sustainable because I think that is where some of the diversity questions will become answered. There may be different ways of working nonprofit models, there may be for-profit models. They have to be considered because ultimately while we are all very creative people, our

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*\*Because these schools were also among the many organizations from which we compiled our lists of playwrights to survey, any specific findings will necessarily be skewed. These particular percentages, therefore must be seen as descriptive of general trends, though in no way definitive.*

<sup>3</sup> A full list of action steps can be found in section eight of this paper.

business models are not very creative...Are we building organizations that ultimately end up locking us into certain places?"

Most participants realized that theater has not effectively kept up with the rapidity with which culture is changing. Although there are theater artists who have the desire to introduce innovating models and practices, they feel continuously frustrated in their efforts to, as one executive director said, "bust through into the system," because the only model that is ever acknowledged is the LORT model.

Participants observed that one of the biggest obstacles inherent in the current model is the fact that once an institution survives the struggle to be created, its main purpose becomes self-preservation. This fight to stay open often results in the organization losing sight of its original vision or in repeatedly making "safe" choices. As one artistic leader said, "If we could have a paradigm shift of accepting that the art that we are creating is in itself a transitory event, and what are we doing trying to force our little hothouse flowers into living room planters? It means an entirely different way of thinking how to sustain ourselves." Proposing the idea of a "time lapse organization," the argument called for theaters to realize that they have a purpose and once they have fulfilled that purpose there is no law that they still need to exist. Create it. Be proud. And then let it go.

It was also acknowledged that while there are theatre artists with innovative ideas, another one of the large obstacles to "busting into the system" returned to the problem that the artists have a strong desire to work with the "biggies," even though their "diversity" programs are considered ineffective. Some argued that theater artists need to stop focusing on these selective, elite opportunities and instead find other methods and outlets to accomplish their work. One creative consultant used the analogy of catering: "You make food. Is your ambition to cater the party at the big house, or is your ambition to feed your community? That is my question. So [my friend] said something really interesting: 'we have to get into the party, the room of the party.' I said, 'Really? Don't we want to create our own party and make everyone get into THAT party?'"

## **VII. The Viral Aspect**

As previously mentioned, one of the structural aspects of the convening was the "third circle" – the presence of bloggers and the continuous tweeting of statements and thoughts throughout the day.

## The Blogs

The blogs allowed for a quick, more controlled dissemination of the convening to interested parties. Although the Institute hired two respected bloggers with large followings to contribute both to the Institute's blog as well as their own personal blogs, it was intriguing to watch how other theater and arts bloggers picked up on the conversation and continued to disseminate it after the convening was over. Conversations about the overall topic, the questions posed by the convening, as well as personal insights have appeared, at the time of this writing, on eleven individual blogs (many with multiple postings) in addition to the two appointed blogs and the Institute's blog. The blog sites are as follows:

- 1) New Play Blog – American Voices New Play Institute  
(<http://npdp.arenastage.org/defining-diversity-convening/>)
- 2) Mission Paradox  
([http://www.missionparadox.com/the\\_mission\\_paradox\\_blog/2009/12/ignoring-the-obvious.html](http://www.missionparadox.com/the_mission_paradox_blog/2009/12/ignoring-the-obvious.html))
- 3) Parabasis  
(<http://parabasis.typepad.com/blog/2009/12/fear.html>)
- 4) Theatre Ideas  
(<http://theatreideas.blogspot.com/2009/12/changing-riverbed-on-fear-and.html>)
- 5) 99 Seats  
(<http://99seats.blogspot.com/2009/12/okay-then-lets-talk-about-race.html>)
- 6) 100K Project  
(<http://lessthan100k.wordpress.com/>)
- 7) On Theatre and Politics – Matthew Freeman  
(<http://matthewfreeman.blogspot.com/2009/12/diversity-and-such.html>)
- 8) Tarhearted  
([http://tarhearted.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2009/12/theater-and-the-real-america.html](http://tarhearted.typepad.com/my_weblog/2009/12/theater-and-the-real-america.html))
- 9) A Poor Player  
(<http://www.apoorplayer.net/2009/12/far-from-the-madding-crowd>)

## 10) CultureFuture

(<http://culturefuture.blogspot.com/2009/12/scott-walters-talks-diversity-ii-dont.html>)

## 11) Smichovsky Compensation Syndrome

(<http://kristofferdiaz.wordpress.com/2009/12/06/defining-diversitynewplay/>)

## 12) Cambiare Productions – Travis Bedard

(<http://blog.cambiareproductions.com/>)

## 13) AAPEX

(<http://africanamericanplaywrightsexchange.blogspot.com/2009/12/diverstiy-in-theatre.html>)

## 14) The Flux Theatre Ensemble Blog

(<http://fluxtheatreensemble.blogspot.com/2009/12/12-holiday-wishes-for-theatre.html>)

These postings, as well as the numerous comments they have generated, have kept the discussion around diversity alive in the field, expanding on the thoughts and ideas of the invited participants.

## Twitter

Led by @New\_Play\_Blog, the Institute's Twitter account, the hashtag #newplay was used to collect the conversation dedicated to the topics of the diversity convening. With only 140 available characters, and only being fed tidbits and one-liners from the room, the Twitter conversation (which during the convening had almost 1000 entries, and has continued to be active post-convening) included individual artists, theater enthusiasts, theater institutions and funders. The followers tended to take the ideas from the center table and spiral off into their own thoughts, views and frustrations. Although much less informed, the followers enjoyed arguing among themselves about the conversation as well as interjecting occasional questions to the room. The followers were also invited to participate in the public evening presentation on Saturday night via live broadcast and given the opportunity to tweet their questions to the participants.

Since the conclusion of the convening #newplay has been established as an open forum to talk about new play development and will be used for all future Institute convenings.

The full Twitter conversations can be found at:

<http://twapperkeeper.com/newplay/>

## VIII. Next Steps

The final question of the convening was:

What's the big vision for diversity in contemporary American theater as you see it? What next steps would we need to take now to make that future a reality?

With the general consensus that there was work to be done, the participants were divided into four break-out groups with the mission to generate as many answers as possible and then report their top priorities to the larger group. The lists that they reported are, unedited, as follows:

### Group #1

- Diversifying all group panels – "diversifying" meaning gender, artistic ability, and geographic. Also, bridging class, sexual orientation, socio-economic standing and language.
- Less panels and more scouting. Actively going and seeing the art and seeing the people. Having scouting where it's not always necessarily to the big institutions. Scouting throughout: finding those basement spaces where you can go.
- We want the scout to be the associate artistic director. And we want that diversified.
- Seriously diversifying the board and staff.
- The idea of the Lancaster season<sup>4</sup>. Have the artists curate and choose the work that's within and give them that power instead of just one director or one person. Have more recommendations from them.
- A long-term commitment to the artists themselves. So that comes to every type of artist-- actors, playwrights. Making sure there's a commitment to them financially, artistically.
- How can we talk to Equity about this? There is a homogenizing effect of an Equity that's focused on LORT and Broadway and is pushing down other work.
- LORT's just doing what they see in NY. We were suggesting this phrase – "create the marquis, don't follow it." So no more assembly line theatre. Make your own marquis that other people will follow.
- Diversify the rehearsal process itself. It's very much a set standard and we can have a different type of rehearsal process that reflects the community of the show that we're working on.
- Sacrifice the egos of the institution. Invite more people to work and have that power and that agency for choice.

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<sup>4</sup> A theatre in Lancaster (UK) that asked the artists in the community to select their season.

- Where can the institution help the artist as far as giving them room to create and fail in a way? So where can they have the time to explore and it doesn't have to be this pitch-perfect thing? Take the journey with them. This needs to be done in productions and not workshops. Workshops are great too, but getting a production... it should be allowed. And encouraged.
- The overall theme there was trust the artist. Follow the artist, trust the artist. And if it doesn't work out, find a way to work that out in your institution and with your audience. And trust them again. Radical trust.

## Group #2

- We'd like to put on plays we like from different people and don't make slots. Let's program our seasons by all kinds of different people and just do them. Why does it have to be specialized?
- There was a want and a need to be able to talk about diversity on different levels and approach it in different ways.
- Most important that this happens in larger institutions.
- We need to follow through with the funders and make sure that we're funding theatres that are actually doing the type of diverse work and doing it excellently instead of giving it to larger institutions that kind of talk the talk but don't walk the walk.
- Make sure that there's mentorship or sponsorship coming with the funding: how to spend the money, how to report the money, and that it's done properly, so that these smaller companies – while doing the work very well – also are being able to develop and grow with the kind of funding that they'll be getting.
- As an artist you feel like you have less power to make change than an artistic director does. As the artist you must remain true to yourself and to mentor aggressively, be honest about the process, making sure that you're giving more opportunity for others, as you make your way through the institutions. But at a certain point it just starts to feel like it's not really your job and you just wish you could stop pushing an agenda and just be an artist.
- We need to note the success of programs like the Allen Lee Hughes Fellowship (at Arena Stage) and other minority fellowships like it, and that it seems to be having a real effect on colored staffing, or “diverse” staffing.
- We need to disseminate clear facts about what comes out of this session and the potential to host a regional conversation about the same topics. Need to stay connected with these conversations and take the initiative to disseminate the edicts that we develop and remain vigilant on getting the notes out there and letting people know what is coming out of these conversations.

- As much as things have changed in the American theatre and there are more people of color in leadership positions, it's still like a controlled spigot and that needs to change.
- One of the larger things that came out was "much like Home Depot would get sued for not having enough black cashiers, maybe we should sue theatres for not having enough colored people on staff." We can link up the problem of minorities in the workplace of other similar organizations that are working on this very issue. The Cure One Institute base as well as "workplace discrimination" has not come up in here at all because we're theatre and it's kind of strange to say "workplace discrimination." But like other businesses, we're having the same problems and why aren't we attacking and approaching them like other fields are doing?
- The States Art Council has fierce and clear guidelines and requirements in how to move forward in the workplace and stopping of funding of organizations that were not diversifying.
- We noticed that as diverse people we are better at identifying the revenue stream values of diversity and not as good at presenting the ethical and moral issues of being more diverse. So we're better about talking about a bottom-line and making people understand it that way, than as "we should do it because it's good."
- We need more diverse marketing directors who understand diversity and a commitment to diversity.

### Group #3

- There should be an online database of different types of diversity. So if you needed a Latino stage manager, there's a place you could go to find it.
- The idea was mentioned of "who has the potatoes in the town, who has the carrots" – what different spice comes in? How can we bring people together? We talked about projects – that they are key. For example, looking at universities – NYU has all these different departments that work together and they bring different groups like gender studies and classes about race together, and theatre.
- We talked about redefining what "success" is, what "big" is – if it's tangible or not – or quantifiable.
- Partnerships. Small organizations coming in to work with larger organizations, and not necessarily being about them both coming out with the same amount of money, but also figure out and recognize the ways to speak about the things the small organizations do bring that the larger organizations couldn't possibly bring to the table. And at the same time, making sure they're sitting at the same table equally. So it's showing the value in resources.

- We think every theatre should tithe part of its seats to the community that it wants to serve.
- The problem is we don't have the tools to make the case – we don't have the research. The tools to make the case for diversity and language that some of our board members or marketing members will understand. We talked about “boards” a lot. How do we educate them and how do we engage them in the dialogue?
- Smaller theatre companies. How to connect them to the funders and bring them to the table. A lot of people don't even know the conversation is happening.
- We should learn from this convening. All convenings should have people taking notes, blogging, archiving – so people can think about it later and we won't have the same conversations over and over again.

#### Group #4

- We were talking about the kind of fantasy theatre that you might imagine. And one of the things we talked about was the architecture. That just like you don't always go to a restaurant for the food, you also go for the great ambiance, because it's kid-friendly. It's not just always the food. It's what's around it as well. The one thing about theatre as opposed to anything you can get on the internet is that it is that meeting place.
- We asked the group: what was an experience recently where you said “this is a great theatre experience, wow.” What were the aspects of making that work? And we noticed that for all of them there was either some element of participation or dialogue. Full Circle at Woolly Mammoth was mentioned. International Wow was mentioned. Even King Lear, Shakespeare, was mentioned because there was that synergy of dialogue and participation and event. A sense of event.
- One thing especially that came out of that was the sense of multiple meanings. The idea that from the internet you get one message, one thing – but when you get from a piece of theatre four messages that you don't know which one is the main one you were supposed to get out of it, that's really where the dialogue and the percolating comes out of.
- We also talked a little bit about marketing and outreach and how at the end of the day, word of mouth is really very important. And looking at that, the relationships between someone gets a flier, they decide to go, and how are they treated at the box office, and what was the program, and what's after... that whole thing is... when you're looking at theatre you have to look at that whole thing.
- We talked about the artistic director, generational leadership, and this idea of passing on the work that you're doing. The idea that sometimes it's not time anymore for something to exist.

- We asked each other about five years from now what things would look like.
- We need to figure out a way that artistic directors have a transparency of what they are thinking and how they're doing the work so the next generation can be a part of it, understand it, and/or take it somewhere else so it lives instead of being suffocated by the buildings we have to own and the seats we have to fill.

## **IX. The Diversity Task Force**

At the beginning of the convening, the Institute was introduced as a center that was specifically created to be a place where the actual infrastructure of new play development could be examined and tested with the purpose of disseminating the findings to the field. With the final lists of action steps presented and the final thoughts of the convening spoken, the Institute promised to take the lead in making sure the ideas, thoughts and suggestions of the convening were heard and implemented.

Since that time, the Institute has continued in its resolve to oversee this responsibility and has committed to the following steps:

- After this paper has been disseminated, the Institute will invite all participants to regroup electronically (via conference call or controlled chat room) to focus on what has happened post-convening and review the action steps.
- The Institute will then invite a group of willing participants to form a task force which will be responsible for determining which actions steps will be left up to individuals and which ones will require further work.
- The task force will regularly convene with the focus to do this work, breaking down the steps and figuring out the best ways to accomplish them.
- The Institute will continuously disseminate their findings and solutions.

The Institute will create separate task forces for each convening it holds with the intent of creating a continuous dialogue that can promote action and change in the national new play infrastructure.

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The American Voices New Play Institute is a center for research and development of effective practices, programs, and processes for new play development in the American theater. The Institute's programs are designed to test and develop promising advances in new play development around the country, with the intention of developing the infrastructure for new plays and new voices nationwide.